



Impact of International Education Experiences on Undergraduate Students

BY ELIZABETH J. SANDELL

The purpose of this article is to describe the impact of study abroad experiences on students at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Minn. The results of the study will help prepare for future studies to respond specifically to the question for teacher preparation programs, "Are teachers educated at the baccalaureate level prepared to provide education for students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds?"

Study abroad by scholars and professionals dates back as early as 500 B.C., when educated people gathered in Athens, Greece. Later, academic centers grew in Alexandria, Rome, and East Persia. Fry¹ observed that scholarly migration for purposes of learning and teaching seemed characteristic of most societies throughout history.

Former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, "Perhaps more than ever, international understanding is essential to world peace... globalization, migration, economic integration, communication, and travel are bringing different races, cultures, and ethnicities into ever closer contact with each other... combining the familiar with the foreign can be a source of powerful knowledge and insight."²

There have been so many social, technological, and economic developments in the past 25 years that, according to Friedman, once again, the world is flat. "What is unique about this era is that it is not built around countries or around companies. It is built around individuals... the dynamic agent is the individual and the small group's ability to globalize."

Friedman maintains that, as the world goes flat, all the knowledge pools in the world will be connected and people can go farther than ever, if they have the educational skills.³

During the past decade, participation in study abroad programs by U.S. students has doubled. During academic year 2003–2004, the number of American students studying abroad totaled 191,231. This was an increase of 9.6% from the year before. Of these, the number majoring in education totaled 7,918. This was an increase of 4.1% from the year before.⁴

International Education Programs for University Students

University education programs require attention to the rapid changes in the world, in part because populations are becoming increasingly diverse. In one school district in southern

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Minnesota, for example, 19% of the students are from a home with a primary language other than English. Families in these homes represent 16 languages other than English.⁵ Furthermore, the growth of the Internet has meant that global conferencing and communication have become more commonplace for young children as well as for teachers. The world is coming to teachers and to students in their classroom.

Changing classroom environments and increased interactions between culturally differing teachers and students prompt a need to examine possible intercultural communication issues in the classroom. Walton conducted an exploratory study to examine relationships among teachers' global-mindedness, their demographic characteristics, and their cross-cultural classroom communication competence. The study concluded that global-mindedness had a direct effect on teachers' classroom communication skills.⁶

If global-mindedness has an effect on teachers' classroom communication skills (and by inference on student learning), and if international study has an effect on teachers' global-mindedness, then one connection is that international study can prepare teachers to have a more positive impact on student learning and global-mindedness.

International education experiences have long been regarded as one means to prepare undergraduate students to participate in a world with increased ethnic and cultural diversity. However, pre-service teachers have found it challenging to find time to participate in international education, due to the time and attention it takes to fulfill the many requirements for initial teacher licensure.

Research to document the impact of international education programs may help to justify the use of increasingly scarce resources in providing and participating in such programs. Pre-service teachers' limited experience with cultural diversity cannot be remedied fully with literature, videotape, or lecture alone. Results from data will help analyze the contribution of international education to the multicultural training that enhances teacher preparation programs.

Impact of International Education Experiences

There are at least four primary areas in which international education is considered to have an impact: professional role, international perspectives, personal development, and intellectual development.⁷ Research literature^{8-15,16} that evaluates the impact of international education experiences on U.S. college students shows that participants experience positive changes, including

- enhanced economic and career benefits;
- enhanced international perspectives, sometimes known as global-mindedness, such as increased understanding of cultural differences;
- personal development and transformation such as increased self-confidence and maturity in decision-making; and
- increased intellectual development, including gains in acquisition of a second language

Methodologies for Measuring Impact

Studies reported above generally used post-experience surveys to collect self-report data from study abroad participants, without implementing an experimental design. Researchers must also contend with the normal life maturation of the students who participate in international education, resulting in the puzzle of what contributed to the students' perceived personal growth. Was it the international education experience or normal maturation? And did the participants represent a selective population, since by definition they sought out the international study experiences and may have been more inclined than others to report impact?

Hadis describes research to compensate for these deficiencies. Instead of a pre-test, he used retrospective questioning to evoke the respondents' state of mind at the time of their application to study abroad. The researchers postulated that this approach was suitable for situations that become pivotal in a person's life in that it enabled them to think of themselves before and after the event.¹⁷

Hadis and others developed a research design that collected control group data from

students who had applied for but had not yet participated in international educational experiences. Researchers also matched respondents according to their ages, in order to control for the maturational factors.

Researchers concluded that the study's retrospective questions and their innovation in methodology are able to compensate for the lack of a pre-test and the absence of a control group. Although maturation certainly accounted for part of the changes, the results encouraged the researchers to infer that it was the experience of studying abroad that explained the positive changes, especially related to global-mindedness and personal development.

Pilot Study

Faculty members interested in international education at Minnesota State University, Mankato have determined that instruments must be short, clear, and easily administered for purposes of measuring impact of international education programs. For these purposes, an adaptation of the International Education Survey from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire School of Nursing was used for this pilot study.¹⁸ Questions were adapted or added in order to reflect some priorities of Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Subjects and Response Rate

The International Programs Office at Minnesota State University, Mankato, identified a convenience sample of 233 students who studied abroad during the calendar year 2006. Students on this list participated in international experiences ranging from short-term study tours to semester study at universities. These students represented approximately 2% of the 12,000 students in the school's undergraduate programs.¹⁹ Information was not available about the academic majors for these students, so the investigators determined to survey all students available for this population.

The principal investigator sent e-mail invitations to students at Minnesota State University, Mankato, asking them to participate in the International Education Survey. The invitation included information about informed

consent approved by the school's Institutional Review Board. Survey respondents were entered into a drawing to receive one of 10 gift cards from a local bookstore.

Twenty-six invitations were returned because the e-mail addresses were no longer active, presumably from students who were no longer enrolled at the school. This left N equal to 205 students. Thirty-one people completed the survey, a response rate of 15.12%. All respondents were White and were between 21 and 30 years old at the time they responded to the survey, compared to a student body that is 58% White and 34% unknown ethnicity or race, and approximately 85% between 21 and 30 years old.²⁰ At the time of their international education experience, 25.8% were 20 years old or younger. The remaining 74.2% were between 21 and 30 years old when they experienced an international education.

At the time of their survey responses, most study participants had never been married. One had been widowed, and 1 had been divorced or separated. In terms of the highest level of education completed, 7 had finished their bachelor's degrees, 3 had completed associate degrees, and 23 were still in post-secondary education at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Definition of International Education Experience

For purposes of this study, researchers adapted a definition of 'international education' from the Washington State Coalition for International Education (<http://internationaledwa.org/about.htm>) as "experiences that result in learning the knowledge and skills needed to understand and to function productively in today's multi-cultural, interconnected world. 'International education' includes a wide range of university programs where students may travel abroad for a short stay that is supplemented by readings and various assignments designed to enhance awareness of a foreign culture. These experiences may be for college academic credit or may simply be for enhancing one's life experience."

Location of International Education Experiences

Survey respondents were asked to list all the locations of their international education experiences. Fourteen students reported experiences in Europe; 5 in South American countries; 5 in Asian countries; and 5 in Australia. (Total is different than number of subjects because students could respond with more than one country for international experiences.)

Survey Results

Students were asked to rate the impact of their international education experience in four areas: professional role (5 items), international perspectives (11 items), personal development (9 items), and intellectual development (4 items). They rated each of 29 statements on a scale in which 1 equals low impact or small result and 7 equals high impact or result.

Impact on Professional Role

More than two-thirds of the students reported that their international educational experience had a big (rank of 5) or large (rank of 6) or high (rank of 7) impact on each of the four items in the professional role category: practice (77.4%), career (67.74%), effectiveness (74.19%), and efficiency (87.09%) (see Table 1). In subsequent open-ended statements, students mentioned that because they were not yet graduated and employed in career positions, they may have responded to this question related to their efforts at the university as undergraduate students.

"...my life truly has dramatically changed after studying abroad. I work recruiting students to study abroad, volunteer to help international students become acquainted with American culture, added international business to my list of majors ... my apartment, other job, and friends are all directly related to my study abroad experiences."

Impact on International Perspectives

More than two-thirds of the students

reported that their international educational experience had a big (rank of 5) or large (rank of 6) or high (rank of 7) impact on each of the 11 items in the international perspectives category (see Table 2). Between 67.64% and 90.32% of the students reported an impact on each item. More than 90% of the survey respondents reported their international education experiences had already shaped and influenced their evaluation of world issues, affected their interaction with people from other cultures, and influenced them to encourage all university students to participate in international education experiences. Between 80 and 90% of the respondents reported their experiences had also enhanced their understanding of U.S. culture, influenced their understanding of professions in countries other than the United States, influenced their discussion with other people about international and trans-cultural issues, and affected their travel or study abroad since that initial experience.

"The true value in my trip was not the business-related activities we had set up but the opportunity to understand what it is like to be a minority, to have to learn customs and rules to conform to another country, and to see how drastically different daily life is for people around the world, yet to know them as people just like yourself."

"I would recommend that all incoming students hear about travel abroad experiences through our college. The skills of travel are often missed by students. Such experiences not only teach students about themselves but they also are assets for their futures. When you travel to another country it fosters the sort of experiences and insights that would take years to accomplish while living in the U.S. I tell everyone I know to pursue the experience!"

Impact on Personal Development

More than two-thirds of the students reported that their international educational experience had a big (rank of 5) or large (rank of 6) or high (rank of 7) impact on each of the 9 items in the personal development category (see Table 3). Each item was reported as impacted by 61.29% to 83.87% of the students. More than 80% of the survey respondents reported their international education experiences had already made them reassess their outlook on their lives in the United States and contributed to their level of self-confidence. Between 70 and 80% of the respondents reported their experiences had also affected their family decisions (spouse, parenting, living arrangements, and so forth), affected their interpersonal relationships (friends, family, and neighbors), and influenced career decisions made since the international education experience.

"I learned more about myself, the U.S. and life in Australia in 5 months then [sic] I have in the past 2 years living here. Being far away from home makes you grow up and become much more independent. Amazing life experience!"

"I felt I was quite open-minded before I went, and also that I could handle hectic situations that were working out horribly. Despite that, I think I have notably increased those characteristics of mine. This is most valuable to me!"

Impact on Intellectual Development

More than 50% of the students reported that their international educational experience had a big (rank of 5) or large (rank of 6) or high (rank of 7) impact on each of the 4 items in the intellectual development category (see Table 4). Each item was reported as impacted by 54.84% to 83.87% of the students. More than 80% of the respondents believed the international education experience had influenced their overall intellectual development. Although 67.74% reported that the experience had enhanced their motivation and/or ability to learn another language after returning to the United States, only 54.84% felt that the international experience had actually affected their ability to speak or read languages other than their first language.

"My choice to study in France wasn't necessarily based on professional needs. I wanted to have a fun summer learning about culture and improving my French. I learned a lot despite that I may not use French in my future career."

Discussion

Students at Minnesota State University, Mankato, reported overwhelmingly that their international experiences had an impact on their professional roles, their international perspectives, their personal development and their international development. Data collected from students who experienced an international education is useful for program evaluation and setting priorities for future efforts, including organization and financial support.

For universities that work to prepare students for the rapid changes in the world and for increasingly diverse populations, international education experiences provide important opportunities for increased global-mindedness. Additional research will be needed to examine the impact of international education specifically on pre-service teachers, immediately after the international experience, as well as over time.

The faculty members of College of Education at Minnesota State University, Mankato, will use results of this study to promote and evaluate their international partnerships for teacher preparation programs with other universities in China, Russia, Thailand, Australia, and Mexico.

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Then and Now...

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Table 1

Impact of International Education Experience on Professional Role

Survey Item	5 = Big		6 = Large		7 = High		Total	
Had a long-term impact on your practice as a professional?	6	19.35%	10	32.26%	8	25.81%	24	77.42%
Been relevant to your professional career?	4	12.90%	8	25.81%	9	29.03%	21	67.74%
Enhanced your effectiveness as a professional?	4	12.90%	10	32.26%	9	29.03%	23	74.19%
Improved your efficiency as a professional?	3	9.68%	14	45.16%	4	12.90%	27	87.09%

Table 2

Impact of International Education Experience on International Perspectives

Survey Item	5 = Big		6 = Large		7 = High		Total	
Shaped and influenced your evaluation of world issues?	3	9.68%	5	16.13%	20	64.52%	28	90.32%
Enhanced your understanding of U.S. culture?	4	12.90%	6	19.35%	16	51.61%	26	83.87%
Enhanced your understanding of U.S. politics?	7	22.58%	7	22.58%	9	29.03%	23	74.19%
Influenced your understanding of professions in countries other than the U.S.?	6	19.35%	9	29.03%	11	35.48%	26	83.87%
Influenced your discussion with other people about international and trans-cultural issues?	3	9.68%	10	32.26%	14	45.16%	27	87.09%
Affected your interaction with people from other cultures?	1	3.23%	9	29.03%	18	58.06%	28	90.32%
Affected your travel or study abroad since that experience?	6	19.35%	2	6.45%	17	54.84%	25	80.64%
Facilitated an international or intercultural dimension in your work activities?	3	9.68%	6	19.35%	12	38.71%	21	67.74%
Increased the likelihood that you would practice your profession in another country?	4	12.90%	6	19.35%	14	45.16%	24	77.42%
Influenced your practices in your profession?	6	19.35%	7	22.58%	8	25.81%	21	67.74%
Influenced you to encourage all university students to participate in international education experiences?	3	9.68%	5	16.13%	20	64.52%	28	90.32%

Table 3

Impact of International Education Experience on Personal Development

Survey Item	5 = Big		6 = Large		7 = High		Total	
Made you reassess your outlook on your life in the U.S.?	2	6.45%	7	22.58%	17	54.84%	26	83.87%
Affected your family decisions (spouse, parenting, living arrangements, and so forth)?	5	16.13%	9	29.03%	9	29.03%	23	74.19%
Affected your interpersonal relationships (friends, family, and neighbors)?	4	12.90%	8	25.81%	12	38.71%	22	70.96%
Influenced career decisions you have made since your international education experience?	4	12.90%	11	35.48%	8	25.81%	23	74.19%
Facilitated an international dimension in your volunteer activities?	6	19.35%	5	16.13%	9	29.03%	20	64.52%
Facilitated an intercultural dimension in your volunteer activities?	6	19.35%	4	12.90%	9	29.03%	19	61.29%
Facilitated an international dimension in your social or religious activities?	5	16.13%	5	16.13%	10	32.26%	20	64.52%
Facilitated an intercultural dimension in your social or religious activities?	5	16.13%	7	22.58%	8	25.81%	20	64.52%
Contributed to your level of self-confidence?	2	6.45%	11	35.48%	12	38.71%	25	80.64%

Table 4

Impact of International Education Experience on Intellectual Development

Survey Item	5 = Big		6 = Large		7 = High		Total	
Affected your selection of reading materials?	8	25.81%	7	22.58%	4	12.90%	19	61.29%
Affected your ability to speak/read languages other than your first language?	4	12.90%	2	6.45%	11	35.48%	17	54.84%
Influenced your intellectual development?	4	12.90%	9	29.03%	13	41.94%	26	83.87%
Enhanced your motivation and/or ability to learn another language after returning to the U.S.?	5	16.13%	4	12.90%	13	41.94%	21	67.74%